

An Interview with Colin Hannaford: Culturally Induced Autism

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1) Professor Hannaford, I know that you have been a keen observer of human behavior and attitudes for more than 50 years. What changes have you noticed over the past 40-50 years in terms of our youth?

Fifty years ago, the main source of information was radio and newspapers. We need now to exercise careful judgment whether anything we hear, read, and even see, is factually true. Another major change is the credence given to spiritual reality, especially to the moral demand shared by religions and science, to be as honest and inquiring as children are honest and inquiring. I have argued elsewhere that the insights of science into physical reality are received in a very like manner to spiritual insights in our metaphysical reality, which is also explored by mathematics.

They arrive unannounced into the mental grasp of individuals who must be prepared to recognize them. Although this is likely happen many times day throughout the world, the battering that any notion of a spiritual reality has received from science has caused many of our young people to decide that they must not trust them. They have an increasing need for a quick fix to assure them that their lives have meaning.

2) I personally have noticed a good deal of LFT- Low Frustration Tolerance - a lack of patience, to want everything immediately and easily. How does this fit into the picture?

Getting that 'quick fix' can become a sole purpose. Once released from society's older traditions, the majority of young people create their own, and then impose them on each other. Believing that they are using their new freedom, they are far more likely to try to 'get outside themselves' by dumping their own identity in the great stew of mass hysteria of a rock concert, in the thudding womb music of a rave, or by giving themselves an experience of ersatz transcendence

with the many natural and synthetic drugs they take without thought for tomorrow. This, and not a new era of global peace and love, is the real consequence of their freedom.

3) I have published on what I call "emotional sensitivity". Many of the current generation seem unable to accept constructive criticism, feedback and any verbal comments. You have recently attracted some very serious attention by writing a brief article about a new concept that you have called 'culturally induced autism'. Are they related?

My principal concern for many years has been the damage to young people's confidence, and then to adult societies, of school math lessons being used to attempt to test their intelligence. Human intelligence is far complex to be measured like this. I learnt to use my math lessons to develop my students' intelligence and imagination as the Athenian Greeks did two millennia ago. Modern education is too much more directed to tell children what they ought to think, not how to think: not how to learn, but what to know. This very soon divides a class of ten to twelve-year-olds into a small minority, called 'successful': very sure of their importance and selfish; a large majority, made to feel disappointed and resentful in becoming labelled 'just not quite successful enough', and another, often large minority, feeling despised by the others and rejected by their teachers, often very publicly, as 'hopeless'. After other four to five years these labels might as well be tattooed indelibly on their foreheads, like caste marks in India. The consequence for them in adulthood, and therefore for societies, is disastrous.

The upper minority, upper in the class, will have an intense dislike, distrust, even hatred of democracy.

The middle division, usually a majority of the class, will become the democratic majority.

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The bottom division, will become the lower class, despised by everyone, hating everyone.

All of this is obvious. How many more people must die from opioid poisoning in their pursuit of the quick fix? How many more school massacres before it is noticed that the killers are always from that rejected minority? I began to realise that there must be a deeper reason why the fact of it being obvious does not prompt immediate change.

The reason is a kind of autism that I have called CIA.

4) I see that social skills seem to be vanishing or at least decaying. How is our current culture shaping and molding young generations?

Young people have not changed fundamentally in the past fifty years. They remain deeply romantic. They want to fall in love, this is the main theme of their music. They still believe in loyalty, in courage, in selflessness. All these require imagination and freedom. They admire those who enjoy both. If they do not, they begin to reject the value of their own difference in a manner ranging from self destructive: 'there has to be something wrong with me'; to the far more generally destructive, 'there is something wrong with them'.

5) I recognise some of these problems in our young people – and also in not so young people! But what has this to do with your 'culturally induced autism'?

It is not an especially modern phenomenon. I have only given it a modern name. I also like the idea of it becoming a bumper sticker: 'End the CIA. It was first noticed by Albert Schweitzer in the 1930s when Hitler was learning to use the media of his time to blame the German Jews for Germany's defeat. Before that, in the 1920s, Walter Lippman called 'manufacturing consent'; in the 1980s the Yale psychologist Irving Janis, called it 'Groupthink'; the Australian Alex Carey called it 'corporate propaganda'; and in 1992 the film *'Manufacturing Consent'* was based on a book by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky explaining how modern media manufacture socially useful ideas.

Useful, that is, to the controllers of the media: "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum." This is, very obviously, not a new idea. What I have added to it is only a further dimension of ruthlessness. Complex societies have always been in danger of fracture.

Their common response has always been to develop a powerful, all-embracing, culture capable of inducing a form of autism in nearly everyone: often including, incidentally, those who think they control it. Anyone who behaves too different, too noticeably, has to be eliminated. Order must be preserved.

6) This sounds grim. How can whole societies become autistic? You need to explain more completely what this means.

It was first identified as a mental disorder in children by an American psychologist, Leo Kanner, in 1943. Its most obvious symptom, and certainly this is the most distressing to parents is that an autistic child rarely displays any interest in other people as people. Instead it tends to treat people as things. Autistic children might once have been treated, not unkindly, as a kind of village idiot: given some unimportant task to continue without supervision, and left alone.

Their most difficult characteristic, however, is not their own lack of empathy; it is that they are usually to be likely to communicate through emotional and physical violence. They attack people, which they can only view as 'things', especially when prevented from doing whatever it is that they find important, with whatever comes to hand. All that is essential, for them, is to dispose of the nuisance as soon as possible. Bombs are useful in this regard. The bigger the better.

7) And you think our societies are behaving like this?

Let me again stress that none of this new. We are only beginning to understand it better. Governing elites, have customarily treated people as things: important only as the source of their power; serfs, servants, tradesmen, soldiers; all expendable. The difference today is that whole societies have never before recognised the greater possibilities of individual freedom and yet have accepted the condition that they may not enjoy them.

How, for example, in the age of Google and Wikipedia, which offer more information at a mouse-click than an average scholar might have had access to fifty years ago, to explain the people of entire nations refusing to challenge the official history of their nation, when every detail has been revealed irrefutably, even by one of their own most distinguished scholars, as fantasy; or why others wish to remain immovably ignorant of the corruption, lies, misgovernment, even the outright treachery, of those they still allow to govern them? Autism explains this as well.

8) Now let me be blunt. Are you saying that our young people are simply too lazy to protest? Or is our current culture, shaping and forming and molding their generation to appear somewhat autistic?

All societies need regulation. Ants need them. Humans need them. Order, rules, rituals, class, rank, manners, and laws: all these are necessary to control imagination, to keep it and bodies safe. Order also limits the ways in which a society can respond to change, to a threat, to a catastrophe. Order intended to produce security can become a danger to survival. Imagination, meanwhile, always finds order limiting. A balance has to be found.

Culturally induced autism is the state of mind of the majority in a society in which an explanation has been found for everything; in which every individual's action can be defined; every minute of every day, and every day of every year, is accounted for; in which private and public rituals become reasons for living; in which everything has its place, and everything is in its place. This order has to be imposed. It may be established by violence and sustained by terror. More conveniently, however, it may be what the majority wants. It may be what their public media tells them is necessary for their freedom and order. In this way a culturally autistic society may appear to be ruled by the will of the majority: of being, in other words, democratic. It may have the offices and appearance of a democracy.

But since it denies imagination any freedom, what it really worships is conformity. Finding its own conformity satisfactory in itself, it will idolise itself. However cruel, corrupt, mediocre or mad they are, its leaders are at risk only if they fail to supply their people with what they need most fundamentally. And this is order.

9) Social skills seem to be vanishing or at least decaying, kids growing up texting rather than talking. Your thoughts?

Although the fact is often not always obvious, such societies are actually dominated by a great fear of imagination: by the anxiety that new ideas may destroy the vital bastion of social dogma; and by the two most fundamental sexual needs of all. The need of women to bear and rear children, and by men to believe that the children are his to support. Moderns may suppose that they have become too modern for these to be important. They are wrong.

These two fundamental needs compound and require the greatest degree and greatest continuity of order. Men are not expected to disturb it. Women are expected to provide men with an exaggerated degree of respect for preserving it. Male aggression may find culturally acceptable outlets in fields as diverse as military service, which offers warrantable murder: through commerce, to science, to other purely intellectual diversions.

In no case, however, may men disturb an autistic society's settled internal order without reaction. Its customs will inhibit. Its laws will warn. Its judges punish. In severely autistic societies, their punishment may be extended to the miscreant's family: as once to his tribe. It may become part of tribal order and made to last for centuries. For a society to move in the opposite direction, it needs to become mentally and emotionally more diverse. This can only happen if young people's imagination is given more freedom.

But since the natural, undisturbed, most eagerly embraced state of human society is autistic, there must be a primary impulse powerful enough to break with the accepted order. This requires the imagination of a sufficiently large number of young adults to become sufficiently powerful, and determined, to strive to reach a higher level of individual responsibility.

10) Your conceptualization of culturally induced autism seems to somewhat accurately describe the current generation. Now how can knowledge of it help overcome it?

'Less is more!' For many years I have written down my thoughts with some of my old pupils looking over my shoulder. No sooner is one problem solved, than another appears. It becomes impossible to stop. As a result my writing for just the past thirty years, the serious and the not-so serious, now forms a pile several feet thick. Some time ago I was shocked to receive a caution from one of my readers, advising me "less is more". I was deeply hurt. Not least because he is right.

In my experience, these three words combine the three great horrors of most young people. The first is that they are not as purely individual as they may want to believe. Mentally, emotionally, and morally, they are products of a culture. Regardless of whether they have embraced it, rebelled against it, or not really noticed that it is there, the second is that this culture has induced in them a whole subset of mental, emotional,

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and moral responses that they do not, and sometimes cannot, consciously control. The third is that rather than being able to feel deep empathy with the whole of humanity, as they may want to believe they can and will, they will recognise more honestly that they only feel entirely confident of the mental, emotional, and moral responses and company of people very like themselves. Others will appear more as things.

11) Do you see any of what you have described in Great Britain?

By a truly convulsive effort, and to the intense dismay and disgust of the British upper class, the British middle class is currently attempting to regain control of their country, rather as yours has achieved in electing your new president. For what it's worth, I wish him well.

He and President Putin have much in common. And now that I have learn to understand it, I recognise a great deal of what I have described in Britain. We have, thankfully, had no school massacres; but London is currently experiencing a murder rate approaching that of Tijuana. This appears mostly to be over the drug trade. And a related item; the concentration of cocaine residues in London's sewers is now the highest in Europe.

12) What have I neglected to ask?

Will it help young people to begin to achieve a sufficiently powerful, and determined imagination, to reach a higher level of individual responsibility, if I place the bumper sticker on my car; "END CIA!"

You could try.

Thank you for your questions, and patience.

REFERENCES

- [1] My ghostly librarian, Spinoza, seldom shows his approval quite so quickly as this, or as strangely. I have recently found a way to give myself a few hours alone during these hot summer days by delivering Amadeus to a friend's house in Central Oxford. It has a shady garden and I can take refuge in a quiet pub in Jericho. The Ricketty Press, which has a vast library of ancient books lining its walls. I took my draft there this morning for further correction, but could not help exploring the shelf beside my seat. There, just above shoulder height, I found a book with an intriguing title. It turned out to be an attempt by an English novelist to describe Adolf Hitler's rise to power in the aftermath of the First World War. On page 266 the author describes Hitler alone – in an attic – tormented by the failure of his first attempts: 'He alone existed. The universe contain no other person than him, only things. These 'men' were in the same category as tools and stones. And it is nonsensical to love or hate or pity (or tell the truth to) stones.' This is what I meant by the autistic mind.
- [2] In *'The Fox in the Attic, Volume One'*, Hughes, R., 1961.

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